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RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000699

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LONDON, PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV SOCI ER

SUBJECT: GSE STILL THREATENING CATHOLIC CHURCH'S AUTONOMY

REF: A) 06 ASMARA 1058 B) ASMARA 338

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Classified By: CDA Jennifer A. McIntyre, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) The Catholic Church continues to endure harassment and pressure from the Government of Eritrea (GSE) as the GSE threatens to repossess Church property used for social and educational programs and insist that priests and seminarians participate in military training. In an August 14 meeting, the head of the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) briefed Poloff on his meeting with the Catholic Bishop of Asmara, Menghestab Tesfamarian(protect) about the on-going efforts by the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) to force the seminarians and priests to do military service and recent initiatives by the GSE to severely restrict Church programs. (Note: At this time the Bishop, a reliable and long time contact, has asked the U.S. Embassy not to contact him directly, due to security concerns. End note.) According to the CRS director, the GSE and Catholic Church remain deadlocked over the Catholic Church providing a list of seminarians and priests to the GSE so that these individuals can be impressed into military and national service. (Refs A and B) In an attempt to threaten the Church leaders, the GSE arrested several nuns and priests the week of August 6, although releasing them the same day. The Bishop told the CRS director, he anticipates this issue will not be resolved, despite the Church's efforts to work with the GSE to reach a compromise, and the Bishop believes there is a strong likelihood that he and the other bishops will be arrested and detained.

¶2. (C) Simultaneously, according to the Bishop, the GSE is moving forward with implementing a 1995 proclamation that precludes religious institutions from conducting any additional activities other than spiritual activities. As a result, the GSE has told the Catholic Church they must relinquish to the GSE all Church properties, including schools and clinics, that are used for social and educational purposes. The church will be allowed to keep its churches, monasteries, nunneries and seminaries; however, all other property must be turned over and programs ceased. Presently, the church operates more than 100 schools, over 30 clinics and various other social service programs including hospice care for people living with AIDS, therapeutic and supplemental feeding programs, economic development programs

for single mothers and HIV testing and counseling. Over seven percent of Eritrean children are educated in non-government schools, a majority of these Catholic institutions.

¶3. (C) When this discussion about the confiscation of Church properties began in early summer 2007, the Bishop insisted the GSE provide the request in writing. During the week of August 13, the Bishop received a letter from the Governor of Debub (the region south of Asmara) insisting the Church turnover the properties in that region. According to the Bishop, he believes the GSE plans to seize the properties in the areas farthest from Asmara first as it will be harder to raise awareness and counter GSE actions.

¶4. (C) According to the Italian Deputy Chief of Mission, one of the most likely consequences of the seizure of the Church property will be the expulsion of the foreign priests and nuns who perform the social services functions. Following notification in spring 2007 that all foreign priests and nuns would have to leave the country (Ref B), these individuals were granted a four-month extension in May 2007. The extension expires at the end of September. By confiscating the Church's properties and closing the programs which constitute the work of these nuns and priests, these individuals will have no reason for being in Eritrea and could be forced to leave.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The Catholic Church's continued refusal to provide the list of seminarians and priests to the GSE, combined with the GSE's planned property seizures, is placing the Church on a collision course with the GSE. The Catholic Church is anticipating even more trouble ahead, including the arrest or removal of the current bishop or possibly greater GSE control over autonomous Church affairs - which could result in a truly GSE-controlled Catholic Church similar to

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the Chinese Catholic Church. The GSE's efforts to control the foreign missionaries and religious institutions mirrors other, on-going efforts to limit the number of community organizations, such as NGOs, run by foreigners in Eritrea. These actions represent yet a few more steps toward an increasingly tight GSE policy to limit and control social institutions that could threaten the GSE's absolute authority over society. End Comment.
MCINTYRE